



Being good mentally: What does it mean?

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ABSTRACT

This article gives an overview and explanation of a number of terms related to being a good athlete from a mental perspective; including mental toughness, flow, the ideal performance state and more recent models of psychological resilience. It will then compare and contrast these different models and definitions. The intention of the article is to clarify the literature for readers so that they can gain a clearer understanding of what these multiple, often overlapping constructs mean. Finally, practical advice is offered on ways in which coaches and athletes can work towards being better mentally.

Key words: Psychology, Mental toughness, Ideal performance state, Psychological resilience, Flow.

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WHAT MAKES TENNIS A TOUGH SPORT FROM A MENTAL PERSPECTIVE?

Weinberg (2002) outlines several factors that are unique to the game of tennis, and that all present psychological challenges. One of the most recognised challenges is the stop and start nature of tennis which results in a high amount of dead time. In a typical tennis match it is estimated that three quarters of the time is spent not-playing. This "dead time" presents a challenge to the mind as it can wander and be distracted by irrelevant thoughts which can disrupt timing, co-ordination and confidence - especially in the context of a pressurised match environment.

Another unique challenge that tennis players must cope with is that each competitor is required to referee their own game by calling their own lines. Furthermore tennis is an individual sport and therefore performers cannot hide behind team mates' performances, nor are there substitutions which add to the challenge.

Other elements that make tennis challenging from a psychological perspective include that no coaching is allowed in tennis during competition, therefore the formulation of tactics in the context of the match environment rests solely with the competitor- again most sports (especially team sports) do not present such a challenge. Finally, the scoring system in tennis requires performers to always close out a match- in this respect it is unlike sports where a clock is involved and players can simply run down time playing defensively with possession for example- in tennis, it is a requirement to close it out.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TERMS RELATED WITH OPTIMUM SPORTING PERFORMANCE

This section will now discuss the various terms, theories, models and definitions that attempt to explain what is required to perform at the highest level and reach optimal sports performance.

The ideal performance state

Research in this area has tried to address the question- is there an ideal mind/body state related to performing your best in a given sport at a specific time? In its most simple definition, the ideal performance state refers to the presence of the right mental and emotional state when performing. Krane and Williams (2006) elaborate on this by suggesting this ideal mind/body state consists of the following: (a) feelings of high self-confidence and expectations of success, (b) being energized yet relaxed, (c) feeling in control, (d) being totally concentrated, (e) having a keen focus on the present task, (f) having positive attitudes and thoughts about performance, and (g) being determined and committed. Conversely, the mental state typically associated with poorer performances in sport seems to be marked by feelings of self-doubt, lacking concentration, being distracted, being overly focused on the competition outcome or score, and feeling overly or under-aroused. It is generally agreed that this ideal performance state is not a simple, one-dimensional state that is easily obtained, however sports performers can learn how to achieve peak performances more often and with greater consistency (Harmison, 2006).

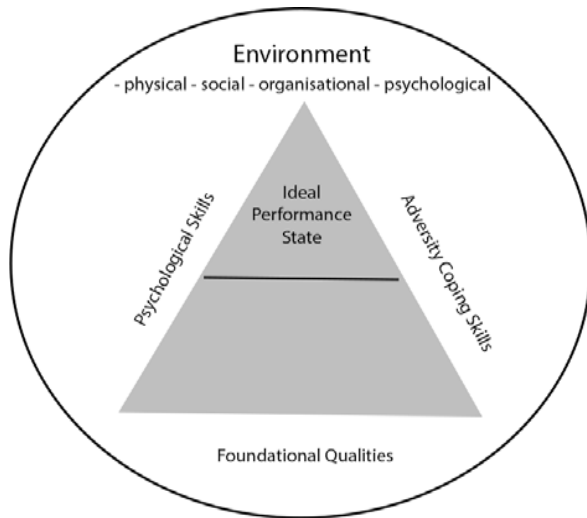


Figure 1. Adapted from Understanding Psychological Preparation for Sport: Theory and Practice of Peak Performance (p. 240), by L. Hardy, G. Jones, and D. Gould.

Flow

When a coach instructs a player not to think about the past or the future in a match, and to stay in the present, they are most likely eluding to ‘the flow state’. The construct of ‘flow’ refers to a yearned for, yet elusive, state of mind that is characterized by complete absorption in the task at hand as well as by enhanced skilled performance (Aherne et al., 2011). Whilst concentration and present moment awareness are the ‘lynch pins’ of this state of mind, the following aspects are also crucial; a challenge-skill balance, the merging action and awareness, having clear goals, concentration on a task, having a sense of control, a loss of self-consciousness and being unaware of the passing of time (see Jackson, 1995). In a nut-shell, flow requires a present-moment, non-self-conscious concentration on a particular task- applied to tennis, this requires a player to stay focused on one point at a time.

Mental toughness

Definitions and characteristics of mental toughness have been proposed by many authors, leading to a diverse range of positive psychological characteristics being associated with mental toughness. Unfortunately, a majority of the explanations have come from anecdotal evidence and personal accounts which puts in question the validity of these findings (Jones et al., 2007). However in a study of Olympic champions, coaches and sport psychologists, mental toughness has been defined as “having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to, generally, cope better than your opponents with the many demands (competition, training, lifestyle) that sport places on a performer and, specifically, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure” (Jones et a., 2002, p248). The results from the study also

indicated that mental toughness was developed throughout their careers and was also capable of fluctuating from high to low.

So what makes this edge? A set of 12 factors were outlined by Jones et al. (2007) in their mental toughness framework. These factors are related to attitude, training, competition and post competition and include among others (a) belief: having an unshakable self-belief and inner arrogance that makes an athlete believe that they can achieve anything they set their mind to, (b) focus: ensuring sport is the number one priority but also recognising the importance of being able to switch off, (c) using long-term goals to stay motivated and pushing yourself to the limit during training, (d) handling pressure through loving the pressure of competition and not being phased by mistakes and, (e) recognising and rationalising failure whilst also being able to manage success when it comes. See figure 1.

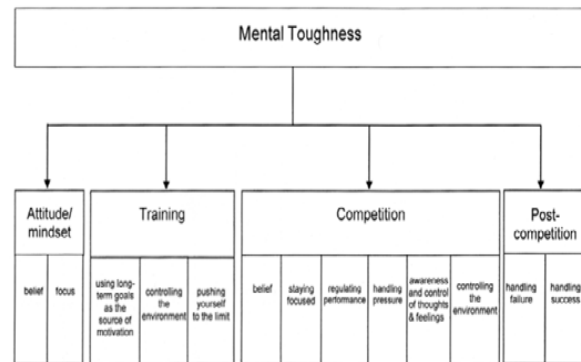


Figure 2. Mental toughness framework from Jones et al. (2007).

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE

Psychological resilience is another theory that attempts to explain the reasons behind why athletes appear to be able to reach optimum sporting performances in their career. The grounded theory presented by Fletcher & Sarkar (2012) investigated 12 Olympic medalists. Results from this ultra-elite sample offers a more holistic and overarching concept for understanding optimal sports performance than the aforementioned constructs of mental toughness, flow or the ideal performance state. Simply put, psychological resilience attempts to explain optimal performance through dealing with stressors in an adaptive manner over an athletic career. “Numerous psychological factors (relating to a positive personality, motivation, confidence, focus, and perceived social support) protect the world’s best athletes from the potential negative effect of stressors by influencing their challenge appraisal and meta-cognitions (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012, p 673). It is suggested that these processes promote facilitative responses that precede optimal sport performance.

Challenge appraisal is where an athlete has the tendency to perceive stressors as opportunities for growth, whereas meta-cognitions, in a simplified sense refers to reflective internal thinking.

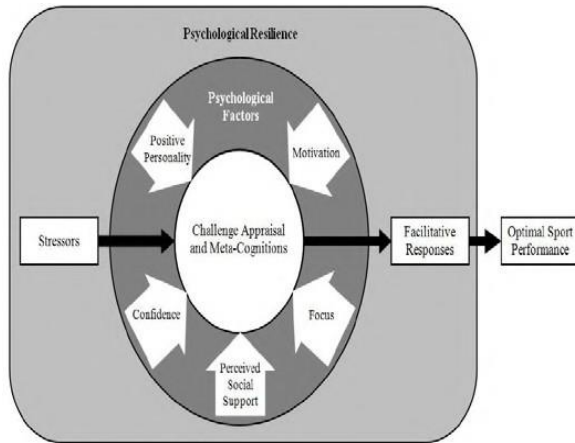


Figure 3. Fletcher & Sarkar's (2012) grounded theory of psychological resilience and optimal sports performance.

This appraisal and evaluation is key to psychological resilience and as stated, will be improved by the athlete's own psychological factors. In explanation; the more positive, the more confident, the more motivated, the more focused and the more perceived social support an athlete has, the more likely they are to positively react to the inherent competitive, personal and organizational stressors within their environment (see Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). The model depicts these concepts and the inter-relationships of this grounded theory.

THEORY/MODEL	IS THE INDIVIDUAL OR THE ENVIRONMENT THE MAIN FOCUS?	IS IT STABLE OR CAN IT FLUCTUATE OR DISAPPEAR OVER TIME?	TRAINABLE - CAN IT BE IMPROVED?
IDEAL PERFORMANCE STATE	Internal mental and emotional state is the focus	A temporary state or experience	Yes
FLOW	Internal state of mind is the focus	A temporary state or experience	Yes
MENTAL TOUGHNESS	Individual as well as competition, training and lifestyle factors are a focus	More prolonged characteristic	Yes
PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE	Individual, competition, personal and organisational environment are important	More long-lasting process over athletic career	Yes

Table 1. A cross-comparison of psychological models.

DISCUSSION

The table above illustrates clearly that regardless of the multitude of definitions, their focus, or the stability of the construct - athletes can work on and improve on certain aspects that relate to any of these constructs. This offers encouragement to both athlete and coach who should look to improve one or all the subcomponents of any of the above models. For example - concentration and focus is a common element in all of the aforementioned definitions and therefore is just one example of an ability that should be worked on by the athlete and coach.

For athletes and coaches looking to optimise their psychological resilience, Sarkar & Fletcher (2012) provide helpful guidelines based on their research on Olympic champions;

- 1) Develop a positive personality - view setbacks or adversity as opportunities for growth
- 2) Optimise motivation - be aware that motivation can come from multiple sources e.g. internal self- achievement can come hand in hand with proving one's worth to others (external motivation)
- 3) Strengthen confidence - understand that confidence can be built up through preparation, experience, visualisation, teammates and coaches as well as achieving goals
- 4) Focus on what you can control, on processes, the present moment, positives and staying composed
- 5) Recognise the availability and importance of social support- as an athlete one should seek support through mentors, building cohesive teams and hiring support staff that can be believed in.



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